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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to determine the effect of the direct and systematic teaching of the nature, purpose, and language of instruction of reading on first grade children's knowledge of this information, on their attitudes toward reading, and on their reading achievement. Subjects were 60 first grade studerts randomly assigned to one of two treatment groups. Group 1 received 20 supplementary lessons to reading instruction, each designed to teach the nature, purpose, and language of instruction of reading. Group 2 received nonrelated treatment of 20 lessons, also supplementary to regular reading instruction, designed to teach reading skills using the newspaper as a source of materials. Independent t-tests were used to compare the two groups on the three dependent variables. Group 1 scored significantly higher on the measures of attitudes toward reading and of knowledge of the nature, purpose, and language of instruction of reading. However, on the standardized reading achievement test, the mean scores for the two groups were not significantly different. (RL)

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THE EFFECTIVENESS OF TEACHING THE NATURE, PURPOSE, AND LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION OF READING TO FIRST GRADE CHILDREN

by

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INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

Many children encounter reading prior to entering school. They see their parents reading; they are read to by their siblings and parents; and they play with books and other reading materials. These children probably understand what reading is all about and appreciate the value of reading. Many other children, however, have limited experiences with reading and books prior to entering school. Most likely, they have heard of reading, but are not sure exactly what it is or what it is for (Weintraub and Denny, 1965). Furthermore, they are likely to be unfamiliar with the specific language of reading, such as "letter," "word," or "sentence" (Reid, 1966; Downing, 1970; Francis, 1973).

Since the importance of being able to read is so clearly understood by most adults, teachers generally take it for granted that children also understand that importance. Thus, for many children, the first meaningful encounters with reading are in learning situations, such as sitting in a group reading aloud, completing worksheets, and working with flashcards. Although the teacher may have a clear understanding of the relationship between reading in learning situations and reading in real-life situations, the children may not understand this distinction. They may then develop the faulty notion that reading is a school-related performance, the significance of which lies in teacher, peer, and parent approval. For them, reading is simply a set of activities which are necessary to perform well in order to obtain a handsome report card and pass to the next grade. Although this conception is partially accurate, it is a highly inadequate view of the reading act. Since an axiom of education is that children should be given purposes for and shown the practical value of activities they are asked to perform, perhaps reading activities have been too long overlooked.

Most teachers do not realize that some of their students have inadequate notions about reading. But, informal spot checks are likely to confirm what the research has already revealed. That is, many children, at all grade levels, are confused about the true nature of reading as distinguished from learning-to-

read activities, about the personal value of being able to read, and about the terminology specific to reading instruction. Research has also indicated a positive correlation between children's understandings about reading and their reading achievement. Thus, the purpose of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of teaching information about the nature, purpose, and language of instruction of reading to first grade children. Specifically, the effects of such teaching on children's knowledge about reading, attitudes toward reading, and reading achievement were examined.

RELATED RESEARCH

Weintraub and Denny (1965) were some of the first to produce evidence that some school children were confused about the reading act. Of the 108 first graders they interviewed, 27 percent responded "I don't know" to the question "What is reading?" The remaining children responded with vague and inadequate definitions which usually involved school-related activities. When Denny and Weintraub (1966) expanded their original study, they obtained similar findings and made the following observation:

> It is worth noting that a fourth of all these entering first-graders could express no logical, meaningful purpose for learning to read .... (p. 447)

Probably one of the most well-known studies in this area was reported by Reid (1966) who interviewed 12 children in their first year of school in Edinburgh, Scotland. She concluded the following:

> (There) was a general lack of any specific expectancies of what reading was going to be like, of what the activity consisted in, of the purpose and use of it, (and) of the relationship between reading and writing. (p. 58)

She also found that they were generally confused about the terminology specific to reading.

In 1970, Downing reported a replication of Reid's study. His subjects were 13 children in their first year of school in Hertfordshire, England. His results confirmed Reid's findings that young children in the beginning stages of formal

education generally have vague notions about the nature of reading and are unaware of the purpose of reading. He also confirmed Reid's finding that reading terminology was poorly understood by the subjects.

The Denny and Weintraub study was later expanded by Johns and Johns (1971) to include children from grades one through six. They interviewed 168 students who comprised a stratified random sample of 24 students from each grade level. Approximately 50 percent of the students gave incomplete, inaccurate, or no responses to the questions. Johns and Ellis (1976) asked the same questions about reading to 1,655 students in grades one through eight. They concluded that "Many students have little or no understanding of the reading process" (p. 124), and that "Many students have a very restricted view of reading" (p. 124).

Other studies producing evidence that many children have inadequate concepts of the nature, purpose, and/or language of instruction of reading include those of Vernon (1957), Edwards (1958), Vygotsky (1962), Mason (1967), Clay (1967), Francis (1973), Downing and Oliver (1974), Tovey (1976), and Johns (1977).

Research has also indicated a positive correlation between children's reading achievement and their knowledge of the nature, purpose, and language of instruction of reading. In 1970, Blanton and Mason investigated the relationship between children's semantic constructs about reading and their reading achievement. An Individual Reading Interest Survey was designed by the researchers to obtain information concerning their knowledge about and interest in reading. The Metropolitan Readiness Tests were administered in the fall, and the Metropolitan Achievement Test in the spring. They concluded that a positive relationship exists between first graders' semantic constructs about reading, their scores on a reading readiness test, and their later reading achievement as measured by a standardized test.

Johns (1972) interviewed a group of fourth grade children, asking them the question, "What is reading?" Their answers were classified under one of five

categories ranging from least knowledge to most knowledge. Categorizations were then correlated with reading achievement according to the vocabulary and comprehension sections of the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Tests. Since both correlations were significant, the researcher concluded that knowledge of the nature of the task was significantly related to mastery of the task. The same procedures were followed in Johns' (1974) investigation of fourth grade "good" and "poor" readers. He found that "good" readers had significantly better concepts of reading than did "poor" readers.

Other studies indicating a positive relationship between children's reading achievement and their knowledge of the nature, purpose, and language of instruction of reading include those reported by Evanechko, Ollila, Downing, and Braun (1973), Ryan, McNamara, and Kenney (1977), Ayers and Downing (1979), and Evans, Taylor, and Blum (1979).

PROCEDURES

The subjects for this study were 60 students in their first year of first grade. All had attended kindergarten the previous year. The sample was drawn from an elementary school in a predominantly rural school system in northeast Georgia. All six of the first grade teachers at this school participated in the study, and the sample included students from each of the six classrooms.

To minimize the effect of teacher differences, three teachers were systematically assigned to each of the two treatment groups. Once the teachers were assigned, the subjects were placed in groups by randomly assigning each student to one of the six teachers.

Experimental Group 1 thus consisted of the 30 subjects assigned to the three Group 1 teachers. They taught 20 lessons designed by the researcher to teach the nature, purpose, and language of instruction of reading. Experimental Group 2 consisted of the 30 subjects assigned to the three Group 2 teachers. They taught 20 lessons designed as a placebo treatment and taken from a set of

lesson plans designed to teach reading skills using the newspaper as a source of materials (Marsee and Long, 1978).

The lessons were taught daily, in 20-minute sessions, for four weeks. All lessons were supplemental to regular reading instruction, which consisted of the Holt Basic Reading System. The experimental lessons were administered during February and March. Following completion of the four weeks of lessons, regular classroom instruction resumed as usual.

At the conclusion of the four weeks of experimental lessons, subjects were tested for knowledge of the nature, purpose, and language of instruction of reading by administration of the Test of Linguistic Awareness in Reading Readiness (LARR) (Ayers, Downing, and Schaefer, 1977). The subjects' attitudes toward reading were measured by the Children's Attitude Toward Reading Test (CHART) (Redelheim, 1975). Approximately six weeks after the completion of the experimental lessons, the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Tests, Primary A (Gates-MacGinitie) (MacGinitie, 1965) were administered by the school as an end-of-year achievement test. Three independent *t*-tests were computed to compare the two treatment groups on three dependent variables: (1) knowledge of the nature, purpose, and language of instruction of reading (as measured by the LARR); (2) attitudes toward reading (as measured by the CHART); and (3) reading achievement (as measured by the Gates-MacGinitie). For statistically significant *t*-values, *d*-coefficients were calculated to determine magnitude of effect size.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The mean score on the LARR for Experimental Group 1 was significantly higher ($t=8.53$; $p<.05$) than that for Experimental Group 2. Thus, the treatment of lessons designed to directly and systematically teach the nature, purpose, and language of instruction of reading had a statistically significant impact on the children's knowledge of such information. Additionally, the *d*-coefficient (1.48) indicated a large effect size. Thus, the treatment for Experimental

Group 1 apparently had a considerable influence on the difference between the two groups.

The mean score on the CHART was also significantly higher for Experimental Group 1 than for Experimental Group 2 (t=6.02; $p<.05$). Thus, the treatment of lessons designed to teach the nature, purpose, and language of instruction of reading had a statistically significant impact on the children's attitudes toward reading in general. Additionally, the d-coefficient (1.23) indicated a large effect size. Thus, the Experimental Group 1 treatment again had a considerable influence on the difference between the two groups.

The difference between the mean scores for the two groups on the Gates-MacGinitie, however, was not statistically significant (t=.15). Thus, the program of direct teaching did not result in higher reading achievement scores after a period of six weeks. A longer interim may be necessary to allow first-graders the maximum development of any possible gains. Expectations of such progress seem reasonable in view of the research indications that knowledge of the reading act, including its purpose and language of instruction, is related to success in reading. Perhaps if understandings about the reading act were taught at the beginning of first grade, students would have a better opportunity to achieve maximum progress toward efficient reading, which in turn would be reflected by higher achievement test scores at the end of the year.

This study has shown empirically that a formal orientation to the nature of the reading act and its language of instruction, as recommended by many authorities in reading, can be successful at improving children's knowledge of this information. Since teachers rarely are required to think about the reading process, they may require specific guidance for teaching information about the reading act (Johns, 1970). Thus, perhaps structured and systematic lessons, such as those involved in this study, would be preferable to incidental and haphazard teaching of information about reading. However, informal discussions, exemplifications, explanations, and descriptions of the nature, purpose, and

language of instruction of reading would certainly be preferable to no such teaching at all.

The results of this study also indicated that the students who received the program of direct teaching had better attitudes toward reading than did the students who did not receive the lessons. This finding supports the logical assumption that students who have better understandings about what reading is and what it is for will also have better attitudes toward reading. Furthermore, if children have better attitudes toward reading and can see the practical uses of it, they will be more likely to increase their reading experiences. Such experiences would provide practice in using the skills learned during regular reading instruction, thereby facilitating improvement of reading abilities.

SUMMARY

The purpose of this study was to determine the effect of the direct and systematic teaching of the nature, purpose, and language of instruction of reading on first grade children's knowledge of this information, on their attitudes toward reading, and on their reading achievement. The sample for the study consisted of 60 students in their first year of first grade in an elementary school in a northeast Georgia rural school system.

The subjects were randomly assigned to one of the two following treatment groups: Experimental Group 1, which received 20 lessons, supplementary to regular reading instruction, designed to teach the nature, purpose, and language of instruction of reading; and Experimental Group 2, which received a non-related treatment of 20 lessons, also supplementary to regular reading instruction, designed to teach reading skills using the newspaper as a source of materials.

Independent *t*-tests were used to compare the two groups on the three dependent variables. On the measure of knowledge of the nature, purpose, and language of instruction of reading, Experimental Group 1, which received the lessons designed to teach this information, scored significantly higher

(t=8.53; $p<.05$). On the measure of attitudes toward reading, Experimental Group 1 again scored significantly higher (t=6.02; $p<.05$). However, on the standardized reading achievement test, the mean scores for the two groups were not significantly different (t=.15; $p<.05$).

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